

Interview with LTGEN Ernest C. Cheatham, USMC (Ret.), commanding officer of 2nd Battalion, 5th Marines. Participant in the Battle of Hué City, February 1968. Interviewed by Jan K. Herman, Historian of the Navy Medical Department, 20 October 2005.

What I'm aiming at, general, is your perceptions of the Navy Medical Department's support of your Marines in the battle for Hué City. But first, a little background. You didn't start out as a Marine. You were a professional football player earlier.

I was in the Marine Corps from 1952-1954. I went in the Marine Corps during the Korean War when I was right out of college and was going to get drafted into the Army. So I joined the Marine Corps. Prior to that I had been drafted to play for the Pittsburgh Steelers. But because I had to go in the service, I spent 2 years in the Marine Corps and then came back and actually got a 3 months early discharge so I could pursue my career in the National Football League, which was pretty short.

Anyway, I came back and went to training camp with the Steelers in '54 and played for them through the exhibition season, the first two league games, and then they traded me for a helmet and a water bucket to the Colts. I then finished out the season with the Colts.

During that time, I had decided that this was not the life I really wanted. I figured that I could probably stick around another 2 or 3 more years but I was never going to do anything really great. There were just better football players than myself and so I came back in the Marine Corps in March or April of '55. From then on I stayed in the Marine Corps as a regular officer. When I was originally in, I was a Reserve. The Marine Corps offered me a regular commission and I came back in in 1955 and stayed until '88.

You must have loved it.

Yes, I did. It was a wonderful career. I thoroughly enjoyed it. The only job I had in those 37 years that was bad was the last one I had, in which I was the Director of Manpower at Headquarters Marine Corps. And that was sort of a political type of thing and I really didn't like it. But other than that, I had a wonderful time.

I want to take you back to 1968—a significant year. You went to Vietnam as CO of the 2nd Battalion, 5th Marines.

I initially went there as a major. I was assigned as the executive officer of the 1st Battalion, 5th Marines. When I made lieutenant colonel sometime in late 1967, I was slated to move over and take over the 2nd Battalion, 5th Marines. I went to Vietnam as a major and made lieutenant colonel and assumed command of the 2/5 on the 2nd or 3rd of January of 1968.

So you weren't there very long before the rug was pulled out from under you.

That's right. About the 15th of January they moved the battalion. At that time we were in An Hoa, which is south and west of Danang. They moved us up to Phu Bai, which was north of Danang and much closer to Hué City. There was no thought of anything at Hué City at that time. I think we were moving up there to replace a battalion of the 3rd Marine Division that was going on up around Khe Sanh. So we just moved up there and assumed a tactical area of operation and worked at patrolling up until the 31st of January when everything came apart.

When things did come apart, your battalion did not go in immediately.

No. In fact, this has always been an irritation to me. We were piecemealed in. First of all, they sent the 1st Battalion of the 1st Marine Regiment up to Hué and that was only about half a battalion. They literally got creamed. Then they took one company of mine, then another company of mine on successive days to reinforce that battalion. Then, when the fighting got more severe and we found out really how many people were in the city, then they sent the regimental headquarters of the 1st Marines and the remainder of my battalion. I went on up to Hué on the 3rd of February and then took control of the two companies I had up there, and brought headquarters elements to support the battalion and another company with me. So I went up with three companies instead of the four because I was ordered to leave one behind.

Initially, you had a lot of problems as far as intelligence. I know there's some incident that occurred between you and the commanding general regarding you wanting some more intelligence. And he said something to the effect that you weren't getting any more.

Well, what really happened was that it wasn't the general. It was COL Stan Hughes of the 1st Marine Regiment, who I was working for. He didn't say that I wasn't going to get any more. He was just as much in the dark as I was. He issued me an order to start retaking this portion of the south side of Hué City, what they called the buildup area where all the foreigners were—the sort of European side of the city. When he was issuing these orders to me as to what I was supposed to do and what he wanted the other battalion commander to do, he said, “Now if you're looking for more intelligence, you're not getting any more because we don't know what's going on. Just get up there and get going. And I'll support you any way I possibly can.” Which he did.

You were on the south side of the Perfume River and you were ordered to take the Treasury and the Post Office, but found those hard nuts to crack.

Yes, that's right. The south side of the river was like a pie shape. The north side of the pie would be the Perfume River. Part of the pie that would go from east to west or west to east was Route 1, which was the main north-south road in that portion of Vietnam. The edge of the pie—the arc—was the Phu Cam Canal. We started right at the base of the pie, very near the MACV compound, which was near Hué University at that time. About two blocks up from Hué University, which actually extended about two blocks long, was the Treasury Building and the Post Office, and then a very large building, which was sort of a pharmaceutical building. Just beyond that was the hospital going further west.

When I spoke to GEN Christmas about his experience, the first thing he brought to my attention was that this type of fighting was not the kind of fighting you folks were used to. You had been in the rice paddies and the jungle, and suddenly you found yourselves in an urban environment and everything changed.

Everything changed. The last time the Marine Corps had done any street fighting of any consequence was fighting for the city of Seoul in Korea. And that went all the way back in 1950. We hadn't practiced fighting in an urban environment. Many of the weapons you would use in an urban environment had been cast aside because we had been running through the rice paddies.

And I think that was one of the big things that's been overlooked. One of my biggest contributions to that fight for Hué City was the fact that I had about 24 hours to get ready. We knew we were going into the city and I picked up a couple of manuals. One was an old manual called "Combat in Buildup Areas." Another one was "An Assault of a Fortified Position."

I sort of speed read through these two manuals and what became obvious to me was that I needed some of the weapons that we had not been using. We never carried our 3.5-inch rocket launchers in the field when we were running the paddies. Nobody took them; they just left them in the rear areas. So I gathered every 3.5 rocket launcher I could throughout the regiment—not just my battalion—and all the ammunition I could get.

This was back in Phu Bai before you went north.

Yes. I also took flame-throwers with me. They turned out to be absolutely useless but I was thinking about them. I also took the 106 recoilless rifles that we couldn't haul through the rice paddies because they were just too big and too heavy. I mounted them on what at that time were called mechanical mules, put them on a low boy, and took them to Hué City with me. I took six of them.

They proved invaluable, didn't they?

Yes. And then I found every gas mask I could scrounge in the regiment and took those with me. I also took tear gas—the old CS gas. I think those weapons we brought with us to Hué City were building-busters. They were door knocker-downers. They could penetrate walls. The mass on a recoilless rifle or a 3.5 rocket launcher blows a very large hole and that was what was necessary. You couldn't walk through a door without getting yourself killed. So you either had to make your own door or you knocked a portion of a window out so you could get through. The 3.5 was invaluable to us. The 106 recoilless rifle was invaluable.

In Hué City there were two or three tanks that became available, although they were not that much help. They drew more fire than they did anything. As we worked there for the first couple of days, we started using the CS gas to run them out of buildings that we just could not penetrate.

How did that work out?

It worked out very well except for a couple of glitches. First of all, it was miserable wearing those old type gas masks. And one time we had them on for almost 16 hours in a row. In employing CS, it worked very well against the enemy but it also blew down on the other infantry battalion that I was working with. I had not notified them that I was going to use CS. I took care of the NVA but also took care of a good portion of the 1st Battalion, 1st Marines and I heard about that one real quickly.

But the CS worked well for us and we might have used it two or three times further on down—from day one down to day seven. But we really used it the first three or four days trying to get those people out of the Treasury building. It was reinforced concrete and so was the Post Office. It took us a day and a half to two days just to cross that 35 to 40 yards.

The type of warfare you're talking about was pretty brutal and there were many,

many casualties. I understand that a lot of the wounds may have been caused by secondary missiles when things impacted against concrete.

There was a lot of that. There was a great number of fragmentation wounds caused by concrete. When it was all added up, I've been told that we had some 600 or so casualties and I only took 850 people up into the city!

That's a pretty horrible ratio of injury to the number of people engaged.

Yes. And there was another thing, too. There were a number of times . . . and I mean up in the dozens . . . where people would receive wounds and never go back. Or go back to the aid station and then turn right around and come back to us.

This was on their own initiative.

This was on their own initiative. The standard procedure was that you get wounded, you get tagged, and you get medevaced. Well these guys would get tagged and they would just turn around and come right back up to the unit.

When you were still at Phu Bai, before you moved out toward Hué City, as a battalion commander you probably had some thought as to the kind of medical support you would require in that kind of a fight. Had you thought about that much?

To be very honest, I didn't have to really think about that much because we had two doctors with us at the time. And when we went up into the city, another one was attached to us so we had three doctors that I remember. We also had a pretty good load of corpsmen. And those we didn't have with us were sent up to us from regiment. So we were pretty well stocked with a medical capability. At least I felt that way.

Do you remember any of the doctors that were up there with you?

No. But I think they could be pulled out of the after action report of the battalion.

So you didn't have any personal contact with them, did you?

No more than when I would go in and check the aid station a couple of times a day. Much of the time, my actions were through Lou Legarie. It might sound a bit funny but the doctors we had were young guys. They had no real military experience. They certainly did when it was all over with; there's no doubt about that. Lou was the one who pulled it all together and showed them where to set up and do various things like that. So I leaned pretty heavily on the Senior Chief.

Well, his name comes up a million times when I've talked to any of the corpsmen. And I've actually interviewed Lou Legarie. He's a crusty old guy, I'll tell you.

Yes he is. He's quite a character.

From your point of view, then, you felt that the medical situation was pretty much in hand.

Well, I felt that it was. I never got the impression from anyone on my staff or from the

chief, or any one of the doctors, that they were low on any type of medical supplies that were necessary. They were absolutely overloaded with casualties. But one of the nice things—if you can say there was a nice thing about it—our logistics in Hué City were reasonably easy. If you think about our base from where we started, we fought the first 14 days, and we received most of our casualties during those first 14 days. We only went seven or eight blocks in that time. What you didn't have you could get reasonably quickly by just running back four or five blocks or sending a jeep or mechanical mule back to bring things up.

It was the same thing with medevacs. When we'd get a man hit and he was near death or very seriously wounded, he could get back to a clearing station at the regiment, which was the 1st Marine Regiment and sometimes be on a helicopter in 30 minutes. The logistical line that was required when a man was wounded and evacuated in the city the way we were fighting was reasonably simple.

The same thing with resupply. When we had to get food, water, or ammunition, the Navy brought it up the Perfume River. There was an LCU landing just east of Route 1, where the Navy could come up in LCUs and bring ammunition, food, medical supplies—anything we needed. And even when we couldn't use the roads because they had been cut or blown away, we were still able to be resupplied either by helicopter or by those LCUs. So the logistical aspects of medicine, of ammunition, of food, of fuel were reasonably easy because of the short distances we traveled. Of course this is one man's opinion. What I saw as the battalion commander wasn't necessarily what my company commanders saw. And I'm sure the company commanders would tell you the same thing. What they saw at their company levels was very very much different at their platoon levels.

From your observation, did you encounter any corpsmen in action doing their thing and saving people?

I saw corpsmen a number of times go out with people down and administer to a wounded Marine under fire. I'm lumping it together here but I would guess that I, myself, saw such things at least three or four different times. I'm sure that people like Ron Christmas and Mike Downs saw it more than I did.

You must have formed an opinion right at that moment when you saw that kind of thing.

I believe there's a real bond between Navy corpsmen and the Marine Corps. The doc—small "d"—was always with us and he was just another Marine. He was the one who carried the medical bag. There's always been a real fondness and a real close bond going both ways. A lot of corpsmen are very proud that they served with the Marines. And the Marines have always tried to treat the corpsmen as best they could because they know their lives depend on them.

You didn't cross the Perfume River and take part in the Citadel operation, did you?

No, I did not. The 1st Battalion, 5th Marines went across and worked on the other side. We spent our time on the south side of the river in what you might call the "new city." And later on, when the real urban fighting was done, we moved out to the west of the city but still stayed south of the Perfume River.

How many days were you in the city altogether?

I would say probably 14 to 18 days, maybe 20. We stayed in the area for almost 6 weeks but a lot of that time was after we had driven the NVA out of the city. After that, we moved out to the west in an attempt to drive them back or surround and capture them. And that took a lot of fighting but it was all in the countryside.

You had a bunch of journalists who were connected with you. I've seen some of the newsreels and such. I know that John Laurence from CBS was there with you. He wrote that book, *The Cat From Hué*.

I read it and I thought it was very, very good. I really did. I think he described things a lot like they were. I thoroughly enjoyed the book.

I did also. It was my summer read this year.

There were other journalists and photo journalists there. In fact, two or three of them got dinged during the battle. I think one was killed and two or three were wounded. They were good people. They tried to do their job and there wasn't animosity that always seems to arise between the military and the media.

Well, it's been 37 or so years since all that happened. Do you ever think about Hué City and Vietnam much anymore?

Not so much anymore. Once in a while it will come on the History Channel and one of my kids or a friend—or former Marine—will pick up the phone and call me and say, “Hey, I saw it already or it's on tonight.” And after seeing some of the scenes of it again, it makes you think. But I'm not the type of person who carries things around like that. I don't keep any excess baggage. As far as I was concerned, it was a job that was done and I was extremely proud of the Marines I was serving with at the time. And we did a good job.

I really want to thank you for agreeing to do this interview.

It was my pleasure. Have you talked to Mike Downs?

No.

I would suggest that you might want to talk to Mike. He had Foxtrot company of the battalion. Fox Company had tough times. He lives in the DC area. He's working for the Marine Corps right now. He's a retired brigadier general. I'm sure that Ron Christmas or somebody can give you his telephone number. Mike kept a very good log. He was one of these kind of guys who wrote everything down. And he got hit there like Christmas did but not as seriously as Ron. He was wounded but didn't get evaced. I think he got a through-and-through in the leg or something and stayed with us. But Mike was a detail guy and has a good memory.

Mike's company was one of the companies that was detached from me and sent to Hué before we got up there. And he got in some ferocious fighting. He was sent to places he never should have been sent. And so was my Golf Company commanded by Chuck Meadows. He's retired and living on Bainbridge Island in Washington. Golf was the other company that went up

ahead of me. Some idiot sent them across that bridge over the Perfume River to find out what was going on in the other part of the city before we ever got there. I think he had forty something casualties just trying to cross the bridge.

I will certainly find General Downs. Thanks for the tip. And thank you again for your time.